Is There a Stigma Associated With Pilots Taking Medication?

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According to FAA regulations, commercial pilots are allowed to take certain approved medications. Previous research has shown that people who take certain medication can be exposed to social stigmas if others know about their medication intake. This is particularly true for medications prescribed for mental illness. No research that we know has analyzed how aviation consumers would react to the knowledge that the pilot of their commercial aircraft is taking medication, or how the type of medication and dosage might differentially affect consumers' willingness to fly. We presented participants with various scenarios about a pilot who has been taking one of four types of medications (Prozac, Claritin, Ibuprofen or Catapres), or no medication at all at a low or high dosage. We then asked participants how they felt about the situation as well as their willingness to fly. We hypothesized that participants would feel more negatively about, and be less willing to fly in, situations where the pilot was taking medication, particularly at a high dosage. We also predicted that participants' emotions would mediate the relationship between the type of medication and how willing participants were to fly in each scenario. Not surprisingly, the results revealed that participants were more negative about the pilot taking medications compared to the non-medication condition, and that a high dosage of medication was viewed more unfavorably than a low dosage. Interestingly, participants were especially negative about the pilot taking Prozac. Even the *low* dosage of Prozac generated stronger negative emotions, and less willingness to fly, than the *high* dosage of the other medications. Mediation analyses revealed that the relationship between type of medication and willingness to fly was fully mediated by participants' emotions; that is, participants were basing their willingness to fly judgments solely on emotional, rather than cognitive, factors. This data supports previous findings in the mental health literature that taking anti-depressants can lead to social stigma that has wide-ranging effects on trust and other dependent variables.